

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

495-1000 8132

June 15, 1987

- 1400 Center

John F. Kennedy School of Government  
79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dr. Daniel Ellsberg

Dear Dr. Ellsberg:

I enclose a document that my friend and fellow psychologist, Margaret Brenman-Gibson, thought would interest you: A psychological study of the final 48 hours of the Cuban missile crisis. My thesis is this: That the standard interpretations of this event, from participants and analysts alike, are much too cognitive, too bound up with the micro-economic, rational-actor "psychology" that has so bewildered me, since I entered this field about three years ago. I have tried to avoid, at all costs, being reductively psychological. I want to speak too the people who speak most authoritatively about risk of nuclear war, not at them. But I have also tried my best to suggest that the key lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is that it was resolved peacefully, with only one American death, because leaders on both sides became powerfully filled in the last two days with the fear of inadvertent nuclear war. They were losing control of the situation and they knew it, and this is why they threw in the towel. This manuscript will be revised next month, in accordance with a great many interviews I have conducted in the past several months with former members of President Kennedy's EXCOMM, but also with others, such as Ray Cline, Ray Garthoff, Bill Hyland, Abe Chayes and others. I plan to write an epilogue that says two things, mainly: That the hypothesis is confirmed--fear of inadvertent nuclear war was the reason the crisis ended when, and as, it did; but also that there was a significant minority in the EXCOMM that felt none--I mean absolutely none!!--of this fear. Maxwell Taylor, speaking just before his recent death, Douglas Dillon and Paul Nitze have all said that they were amazed at the fear in their colleagues and that they have never understood in the least. To these people, there were no risks, and the US ought to have bombed the missile sites immediately, and this would have provoked no response from the Soviets, simply because of the roughly 5000-200 or so gap between the number of strategic weapons at the disposal of the two superpowers.

I send this to you now, along with this request that you and I arrange to talk about the crisis, for several reasons. First, as you will note in my manuscript, I deal only very slightly with the Soviet side of the equation. I had no choice. I was told by such people as Garthoff, Taubman and Horelick that all we really know for sure is that Khrushchev was scared in pretty much the way, and to the extent, he describes in his memoirs. I do draw on this material, as best I can. But I have heard from Scott Armstrong at the National Security Archive (who was instrumental in helping me put together a briefing notebook of 500 pages or so, in preparation for a conference we recently held on the missile crisis) that you believe that more can be said about the Soviet fear of inadvertence, of losing control of the situation, than has heretofore seen light of day. In particular, he mentioned what he called



a "firefight" at one of the SAM sites in Cuba, during which Cubans and Soviets were killed, as the Cubans tried to overrun the base, or perhaps did briefly overrun it, as the Cubans tried their damndest to provoke a war between the superpowers, rather than allow the missiles to be removed from Cuba. If true, then this provides even more evidence that the Soviets too, like the Americans, were having all sorts of problems retaining control of the situation. As your old boss Bob McNamara told me last month, the missile crisis proves to him that crisis management, as some sort of technology for managing crises in which nuclear weapons are involved, is just nuts. This new revelation, if true, would prove that there is an important symmetry to the fear of inadvertent nuclear war in a crisis.

Although Scott did not say so, I have heard from others that you are the source of this information about the fight between Cubans and Soviets in Cuba, in October, 1962. In asking around, I found no help whatsoever from the EXCOMM people, who seem not to be familiar with it at all. Finally, quite by accident, I came upon the source--yourself. I asked for, and received, permission to see the rough take of the WGBH special "Nuclear Age" episode on the missile crisis, just to help prepare myself for the conference I organized on the event back in March, down in the Florida Keys. I just wanted to see what they had done, and in return I have shared with them our briefing book and, when it is cleared through all the participants, I will give them the edited transcript of our meeting as well. Of course, I saw you describe the episode in Cuba at one of the SAM sites. I was so flabbergasted by this that I asked Alex George, who is a kind of father figure to me in this new field, to tell me about you, because I had heard from Alex once that you and he had worked together many years ago at RAND. I did not tell him why I wanted to find out about you. He told me this: That you were, and remain, one of the most scrupulous, honest, careful and sensitive people he has ever met and, whatever you say must be taken very seriously. This was corroborated by Margaret, who attended a conference this past weekend out in the Berkshires at which I presented the results of some of my research on the missile crisis. The basic finding was that you are not only reliable but that you really are the sort of person I always thought you were when I was a student in Ann Arbor in the early 70s, <sup>and when</sup> you performed the supremely patriotic act of this century by informing the American people, via the Pentagon Papers, about the activities of our government in Indo-China. I say all this because the revelation about the SAM site fight was so shocking, and I could get no help whatsoever from anyone on trying to track it down to verify it. None whatsoever, and we are talking about the cognoscenti of the field, and almost all of the living EXCOMM people. And so I come to you.

I want you to understand my purpose: I want to talk to you about the Cuban missile crisis. That is all. I am not a journalist, I am not interested in the least in "scoops." I am trying to figure out why the Cuban missile crisis ended without a war, I have tried to integrate into my analyses some of my psychological background, and I have come to some preliminary conclusions. These involve chiefly fear of inadvertent nuclear war. But I have been unable, simply because I am so ignorant, to carry my argument to the Soviet side. And I don't have to tell you how important it is to do so. Everytime I or some



of my other colleagues who believe that the real nuclear fear ought to be inadvertence--Murphy's Law--talk or write about this, we inevitably hear: *from who? 8 p.m.?*  
 "Sure, but the Soviets are not like us. They respond only to cold hard facts, *show you*  
 like being very far behind in the arms race." If any light--any light--*are*  
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 a blow might be struck for sanity in the analysis of nuclear crises, and risk  
 of nuclear war. Your piece of information, if true, would help to do just  
 this, and I would like to talk about it with you.

Moreover, I myself have some information that, if you have an abiding  
 interest in the crisis, may be of some considerable interest to you, and  
 which points us in the very same direction as your revelation. It is this:  
 Dean Rusk told me not long ago that on the evening of October 27, 1962,  
 President Kennedy ordered him to place a phone call to Andrew Cordier at  
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 Khrushchev's own acceptance of the deal--the private "trade" and the public  
pledge not to invade Cuba, for getting the missiles out of Cuba. So, you can  
 see that as new information comes to light, it all seems to be pointing in the  
 same direction--toward fear of inadvertence, and what it might lead to. There  
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Not only will I be revising the manuscript I have enclosed, but a colleague  
 and I--a graduate student in the Harvard Government Department--are writing  
 a second book on the whole crisis, using our rich interview material. I  
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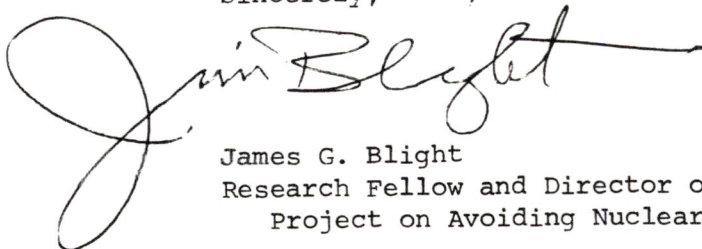
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informed by over a quarter-century of <sup>Your</sup> immersion in problems of national security. It would be the visit of a junior colleague to his senior, if you like. Or, if you will be on the East Coast over the summer, I would be happy to meet you nearby. I seem to recall that you sometimes show up on the Cape in August, when Bob Lifton, John Mack, Margaret and the others get together in the spirit of Erik Erikson, and often with the Eriksons. Perhaps something like that would provide an opportunity to get together.

But enough. I'll look forward to hearing from you. I don't mind saying that you used to be one of my heroes, when I was an undergraduate. I guess this fact worked unconsciously during the year I was a student here at the Kennedy School, 1983-1984, because the first term paper I wrote took its epigram and title from your introduction to E.P. Thompson's Protest and Survive, on the "revolt of the hostages." Now, it appears, I may with luck have an opportunity to transform hero worship into something like a real and mutual exchange of views on an event in which I am presently immersed, and in which you actually participated. I hope it works out.

All the best.

Sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Jim Blight". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James G. Blight  
Research Fellow and Director of the  
Project on Avoiding Nuclear War



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\* Yet JFK acted on Oct 27 (except for cowardly attack on SAMs) as if he had no fear of losing control - endless for the next 24 hours at least; if he had none (like Nitze or Taylor) what would he have done differently? (ditto on SAM site, indeed). Why was this? and why did he act differently? (as if he was about to lose control unless he withdrew)



a "firefight" at one of the SAM sites in Cuba, during which Cubans and Soviets were killed, as the Cubans tried to overrun the base, or perhaps did briefly overrun it, as the Cubans tried their damndest to provoke a war between the superpowers, rather than allow the missiles to be removed from Cuba. If true, then this provides even more evidence that the Soviets too, like the Americans, were having all sorts of problems retaining control of the situation. As your old boss Bob McNamara told me last month, the missile crisis proves to him that crisis management, as some sort of technology for managing crises in which nuclear weapons are involved, is just nuts. This new revelation, if true, would prove that there is an important symmetry to the fear of inadvertent nuclear war in a crisis. *now!* ?

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? who? (us. JFK School?)

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*Heaven, our crying and threats and bluffs are safe.* "Sure, but the Soviets are not like us. They respond only to cold hard facts, like being very far behind in the arms race." If any light--any light--could be brought to bear on the Soviet motivation for ending the Cuban missile crisis that emphasizes their own susceptibility to this sort of fear, I think a blow might be struck for sanity in the analysis of nuclear crises, and risk of nuclear war. Your piece of information, if true, would help to do just this, and I would like to talk about it with you.

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*His been - continued with a failure to over effecting to narrow the risk!* Not only will I be revising the manuscript I have enclosed, but a colleague and I--a graduate student in the Harvard Government Department--are writing a second book on the whole crisis, using our rich interview material. I would dearly like to include you in our array of interviewees and, maybe even more importantly, on my very short list of people I can talk to about the crisis who were there, as I was not, and who have also continued to think about the event many years later.

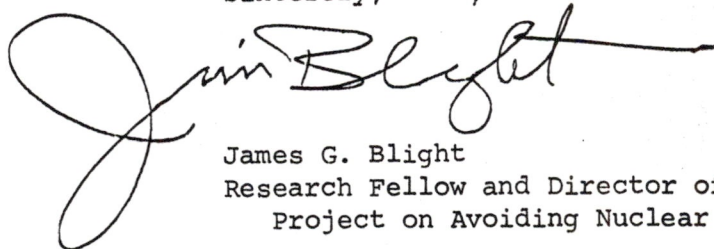
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